



Institute on Religion and Public Policy Report:

Religious Freedom in the Republic of Cameroon

Executive Summary

Freedom of religion is granted by the Constitution of Cameroon as well as protected by government policies. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights serves as the basis for the legal status of religion in Cameroon. Religious issues are mainly handled by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MINATD). The Ministry requires religions to register with the government, which can be difficult, though there are not significant punishments for those groups that do not register, specifically indigenous religions, which operate quite freely. There are no reports of governmental religious discrimination and societal discrimination is relatively isolated.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world

Religious and Political Context

Cameroon is a religiously diverse country in relation to neighboring African nations. Christians comprise forty percent of Cameroon's population, Muslim's comprise twenty percent and the remaining forty percent of the population are animists or adhere to traditional indigenous religious beliefs. Further, the Christian population is divided equally between Protestants and Catholics. Although the various religions tend to be separated geographically, Christians and Muslims coexist in urban areas, as evidenced by the close proximity of churches and mosques in numerous urban centers. Indigenous followers predominantly reside in rural areas throughout Cameroon. This religious landscape reflects Cameroon's political history, starting with indigenous tribal rule and progressing through German, French, and British colonization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries before the area gained independence in 1961.

Contrary to Cameroon's religious diversity, Cameroon's recent political process is one sided: President Paul Biya has continuously served as President since 1982. Biya has been widely criticized for maintaining a dictatorial regime and restricting individual liberties with regard to gender, sex, and ethnicity. He has also amended or adopted a new Cameroonian Constitution three times during his reign, in 1984, 1996, and 2008. Despite these Constitutional changes and restrictions on certain civil liberties, Cameroon supports liberty with regard to religious freedom and practice.

Legal Status

Religious freedom in Cameroon is constitutionally and statutorily protected. The Cameroonian Constitution protects religious freedom in two ways. First, a clause in the Constitution's Preamble "guarantees" individuals' freedom of religion and worship. The Preamble protects this "guarantee" through an additional clause which requires the national government remain secular and neutral with regard to religion in order to further "the respect for all religions." President Biya has respected this secular mandate throughout his twenty-six year rule by keeping his Roman Catholic practices and beliefs largely private, and prohibiting any type of religious curriculum in public schools. While Cameroon's Constitution itself does not expand more upon religious freedom, the Constitution adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Article 18 of the UDHR strengthens the Constitutional Preamble's protection of religious freedom by broadly interpreting the term to include religious teachings, practices, observances, and worship. Moreover, Article 18 protects these religious actions whether they are performed by an individual or group and whether they are performed in a private or public setting. These protections are evidenced by television and radio broadcasts of Christian and Islamic services and festivals, including the government observed holidays of Good Friday Christmas, and Eid al-Fitr. Additionally, evidence is found in the freedom of religious publishing or other religious media, such as the public dissemination of L'Effort Camerounais, a weekly Catholic publication. Cameroon's guarantee of religious freedom, and constitutional adoption of the UDHR's broad definition of religious freedom, has remained strong throughout the alterations or amendments to the nation's Constitution.

The freedom from discrimination on the basis of religion has also largely survived the alterations and amendments to the Constitution over the last three decades. This additional protection originates in the document's Preamble and is furthered through the UDHR. The Constitutional Preamble states that all individuals, regardless of religion, possess inalienable rights. While this is all the Preamble explicitly states, it adopts the UDHR, where Article Two states that everyone, no matter their religious affiliation, are entitled to the rights and freedoms detailed in the UDHR. These rights include, but are not limited to, the right to movement, family, and property without distinction of their religious beliefs or practices. The Cameroonian Constitution protects religious freedom by preventing

discrimination based on religion and by guaranteeing individual's freedom of religious belief and practice.

In addition to constitutional protections, Cameroon also protects freedom of religion statutorily. The Law on Religious Congregations governs relations between the Cameroonian government and the nation's religious organizations. While the law authorizes the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MINATD) significant authority over relations between the government and religious groups, MINATD primarily serves an administrative role and does not interfere with religious beliefs or practices. MINATD's administrative role serves two basic functions.

First, the responsibility of administering the application process for religious organizations is designated to MINATD. For a religious organization to legally function and receive official acknowledgment from the Cameroonian government, it must apply for registration and be approved by MINATD as a religious congregation. The national government defines a religious congregation as "any group of natural persons or corporate bodies whose vocation is divine worship." To apply for religious congregation status, a group must submit a request for authorization, a copy of the group's charter and the names and functions of the denomination's officials. With this information, MINATD makes a recommendation on whether to approve or deny the application and passes the application on to the President, who generally follows MINATD's recommendation and generates a presidential decree to that effect. Religious approval confers real estate tax benefits to the organization.

Second, the role of resolving disputes between or within registered religious groups is designated to MINATD. Disputes may include, but are not limited to, control of places of worship, schools, or financial assets. While in many countries, this role is reserved for the judiciary, MINATD's place within the Cameroonian executive branch has not resulted in reports of widespread restrictions of statutory religious freedom.

Restrictions of Religious Freedom by Governmental Authority

As a whole religious freedom is constitutionally and statutorily protected, however, certain governmental practices or policies could be interpreted as restrictions on religious freedom. First, MINATD's registration process of religious congregations may be deemed discriminatory. To date, while there have not been any reports of the government's refusal to register a religious group, the application process may last for several years because of governmental or administrative delays. Further, MINATD has only registered Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i affiliated faiths, and does not allow indigenous groups to participate in the registration process because the government considers the indigenous faiths a private concern observed by members of a particular ethnic or kinship group. However, despite these delays or restrictions,

indigenous and other religious groups worship and practice freely throughout Cameroon.

National law does not prescribe a penalty for religious practice or worship without government approval, and the government does not enforce the registration requirement. Also, the national penal code criminalizes witchcraft, defined as "any act of magic or divination liable to harm another in his person, property or substance."

Restrictions of Religious Freedom by Society or Individuals

Restriction of Religious Freedom by social groups or individuals occurs occasionally. These instances are not the norm as the majority of religious groups and individuals coexist peacefully.

Social restrictions of religious freedom are primarily present in the provinces of northern Cameroon. Although the population in this area is evenly divided between Christians, Muslims, and animists, there have been numerous reports of societal discrimination by Muslims against Christians and traditional indigenous beliefs, specifically the indigenous Kirdies. The dissemination of anti-Christian tracts in 2004 by an unknown Muslim organization is an example of this discrimination. More recently there have been a few reports of criminal groups discriminating against Christians in the northern city of Ngoundere. However, these incidents are the exception, and the majority of Christians and Muslims coexist and interact well with one another.

Cameroon's religious freedom has led to social tensions within various religious groups. Missionaries of smaller religious groups, including Pentecostals, the Latter Day Saints, and Seventh Day Adventists have reported receiving criticisms and being publicly denounced by larger and more established Christian groups within Cameroon. This tension has not resulted in any reported religious restrictions or violence.

Instances of Individual Religious Restrictions

There have been a few isolated incidents of religious violence and violations at the individual level. Pastor Alombach Godlove was beaten for giving a Christian burial to an indigenous ruler. This case represents some of the tensions between indigenous and Christian groups, which usually does not boil over into violence. Also, Michel Atanga Effa and Gervais Balla killed German missionary Anton Probst. These instances represent troubling issues; however, they remain isolated and do not seem to have started any further violence or discrimination.

U.S. Foreign Policy

The U.S. maintains positive diplomatic relations with Cameroon and keeps an open dialogue on the subject of religion and religious freedom. Additionally, representatives, including embassy officials and the U.S. Ambassador, have had several meetings with local and higher level religious leaders. The U.S. has taken measures to support Cameroon's religious freedom.

Conclusion

Though Cameroon's constitution has changed much in the last few decades and several human rights are not offered by President Biya, the right to religious freedom remains a constant. This right remains grounded in the provisions of the UDHR, which the country has adopted. Also, the work of the MINATD has helped to uphold the freedom of religion and ensure a relatively smooth relationship between religious groups within Cameroon. The positive diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and Cameroon helps ensure the importance of religious freedom in Cameroon.